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Sacred Ties: From West Point Brothers to Battlefield Rivals: A True Story of the American Civil War

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Review

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Carhart, Tom *Sacred Ties: From West Point Brothers to Battlefield Rivals: A True Story of the American Civil War*. Berkley Caliber, 978-0-425-23421-1
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Bonds of Brotherhood

Tom Carhart, himself a West Point graduate and twice-wounded Vietnam veteran, has written a new study of the famous West Point Classes of 1860 and 1861. Carhart chooses to focus on four notable graduates from the Classes of 1861 (Henry Algernon DuPont, John Pelham, Thomas Lafayette Rosser, and George Armstrong Custer), and two from the Class of 1860 (Wesley Merritt and Stephen Dodson Ramseur). Carhart focuses on the close bonds formed between these cadets at West Point, which persisted even after the division of both the nation and the antebellum U.S. Army officer corps during the Civil War. He starts his narrative with a shared (and illicit) drinking party at Benny's Haven, a nearby tavern and bane of the humorless guardians of cadet discipline at what is sometimes now not-so-fondly described as the South Hudson Institute of Technology. While Carhart makes unobjectionable claims regarding the close bonds formed at West Point and the poignancy of seeing these former comrades become deadly foes, his work remains marred by a certain thinness of research.

Carhart is a fully credentialed Ph.D. historian from a prestigious graduate program, and criticism of his book should not be seen as one more symptom of the ancient feud between "popular" and "academic" historians. The fact remains that the foundation of any good history is substantial research, and a perusal of Carhart's notes, even taking into account a conscious decision to avoid the encumbrances of a full-fledged scholarly apparatus, shows a worrisome lack of sources, especially when compared with Ralph Kirshner's *The Class of 1861: Custer, Ames, and Their Classmates after West Point* (1999). Indeed, Kirshner, even though he does not have a Ph.D., built a book on a roughly comparable topic on a far firmer base of research, and the reality is that Kirshner's work

remains a far superior study than Carhart's on a substantially similar topic.

For example, Carhart's treatment of Custer's role at Gettysburg in this study has serious evidentiary issues related to his earlier study of that famous battle, *Lost Triumph: Lee's Real Plan at Gettysburg – And Why It Failed* (2005) that argued for the existence of a "real plan" at Gettysburg involving a flank attack by Stuart's cavalry force on the third day stymied only by Custer's timely intervention. Carhart's argument centered on suppositions and assumptions about Lee's conduct and involved precious little actual primary source documentation, in a war that left ample documentary evidence.

As a question of style, Carhart's decision to use a sentimental prose style to describe the bonds between these cadets sounds discordant to this reviewer's modern ear but has the virtue that it may ring true to the historical actors themselves. On those grounds alone, Carhart has a point to make in reply to readers such as myself who find in such writing too much treacle for our more jaded modern taste.

Nevertheless, in this reviewer's final analysis, Kirshner's *Class of 1861* remains a far better book on what is essentially the same topic, which has the additional virtue of covering all the members of the Classes of 1861, and whose plentiful quotations allow those graduates to, in many ways, speak for themselves.

Wayne Wei-siang Hsieh is an assistant professor of history at the United States Naval Academy, where he teaches American military history. He is the author of West Pointers and the Civil War: The Old Army in War and Peace (2009).